

Silence that Speaks and Dreams that Cry!

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read to the forum by Omeima Sukkarieh

Before September 11 2001, in an act of violence my best friend was almost attacked by a stranger with a hammer

Before September 11 2001, in an act of violence my father was murdered.

After September 11 2001, my best friend's car was egged at her family home and **she** was mocked at a Sydney post office because "Lebanon" appeared on her birth certificate.

After September 11 2001, I was called a murderer whilst travelling alone in my car, soon after my car was broken into on two occasions and personal religious ornaments were destroyed.

My best friend says: It was Wednesday morning, another day in my life. Before settling down to catch the morning news whilst having a cup of coffee, I underwent my usual morning rituals getting ready for work. I made my coffee, turned the TV on, sat on the floor with my legs crossed quite baffled with what I saw, was it a movie America under attack and planes flying through a building? It took at least 3 minutes to register that innocent civilians had been killed, their families, their children, however by far the most frightening was the realisation that the Muslim community here in Australia and all over the world will again bear the brunt of another international political uprising.

I am a Muslim Arab Australian Woman. I am not here representing Muslims or Arabs or Australian's or women.

I am here representing my individual views and experiences only.

I speak in uncertainty, yet in necessity.

I'm exhausted!

I'm tired of having my tears painted by your words!

I'm sick of being interrupted!

I'm frustrated with having my experiences and memories manipulated!

I'm angry at having my voice silenced by journalists who reject me on the basis that I do not qualify the stereotype of a Muslim woman!

I stand before you...naked, wearing nothing but my voice. I will not be silenced. Silence is my power for it keeps you guessing and drives you crazy.

The community has been experiencing a wave of hatred perpetrated by talkbacks, irresponsible media reports and the barrage of disturbing TV images.

Whilst writers such as Piers Ackerman and Miranda Devine are exercising their freedom of speech and expressing their opinions, we are being silenced by the articles they write. And this perhaps is the cruelest part.

Mr Ackerman stated in his article in the Daily Telegraph dated Tuesday September 18 2001, in his opinion on Multiculturalism, and I quote,

"A beard, a scarf, a head dress or the length of a sleeve or a dress are all important to some of these people and the supporters of Multiculturalism tell other Australians that they are the ones who must exhibit tolerance when they are spat upon or cursed when they wear ordinary clothing in keeping with the dominant culture. It is the Muslims who must show tolerance here and in other Western nations otherwise they will always be separate"

In response, I ask you Mr Akerman, and I quote Arab poet Gibran Khalil Gibran "Are you a journalist who sells his principles in the markets of slaves and who fattens on gossip and misfortune and crime? If yes you're a kin to a vulture."

There is something sad about having to share in the grief of the effects of such violence as that which has taken place in the US, Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and the like. But there is something even sadder and more distressing about having to listen to stories of Muslim Women and men who have \been beaten by the direct influences of the Ackermans & Devines of Australia.

→ Who gives the right to any person to physically abuse a mother and her teenage daughter, causing injury and violently stripping them of their hejab (veils)

→ What does one tell a child when he asks why his friend will not play with him?!

→ Why is my mother a sixty year old woman who has frequented the same shop, same owner for the past 18 years now accused of stealing lemons?!

→ How many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters have to be terrorised before the physical, psychological and social impacts are recognised.

→ When will enough be enough→→→

Sept. 11th events were described as "an attack on freedom, an attack on democracy!!!" Whose freedom and who's definition of democracy?

I always thought that protecting other's rights is noble. What happened? Do you acknowledge my rights at all? You have made us miserable mistresses to your media frenzies. You do not have to commit murder you see...to be a murderer. You have built a cage around us not realising that you have locked yourself out.

Why should we be made to feel guilty for being who we are, wearing what we wear, for feeling...for thinking... for speaking...for praying. I am breathing the crippling fear you have instilled in the air.

I feel like I am "someone's private zoo" as Thin Minh Ha so eloquently puts it. But please do not make me your pet.

You cannot possibly understand because you have never committed yourself to understand. You ignore my difference and scorn my identity. You are an annoying obstacle to truth and compassion.

By doing what you are doing, you are instilling racism in yourself. In talking about Australia's parent country, Razia Aziz states that we live in a racist state, and a state that is racist is racist to everyone. But you cannot see it because that state treats and promotes white-ness as the norm.

What do I as a victim feel toward the oppressor? Hatred and rage, impotence, sadness...nothing. What do you expect me to feel?

Through your words you have arrested and interrogated us and it is not what I can give you that you want...it is me. It is the victim...your objective is to reduce me to powerlessness and silence. But you haven't. And I am here today!

You have incited a hatred that smiles. Do you have a need as Michael Humphrey states, and I quote, "to control massive populations, entire social classes, and even nations, through the cultural elaboration of fear."

Do we become participants of this media frenzy by choice? I did not choose to be part of the denial of my basic rights?

My government cannot be my reliable protection, as every government in this world seemed to have failed. We are forced to differentiate between the 'us' and 'them'. To consider the possibility of being the same...trying hard to bury the images on yesterday's news. How can we be unaffected?

How do we support a man who has bragged about never reading the international section of the paper. We love you George.

And what is peace? Is it in the eyes of the children? The breast milk of their mothers? If yes..then why do we kill them?

I come to you Australia. I present you with my pain. I present you with part of my heart. If you possess a great soul...you thank me. If you possess a small one. You belittle me?

Who defines citizenship as privilege? You describe refugees as aliens and illegals. You demoralise them. You aid in the refusal to hire 'aliens', refusal to rent them houses, sell them food, walk in the streets, take their children to school.

What justifies the use of force against those seeking freedom and asylum? They are not criminals or armed invaders. They are ordinary people, peaceful people, seeking only the opportunity to build decent and secure lives for themselves and their families.

On what moral and ethical grounds can these people be kept out?

Refugees, violence, torture, displacement, Stateless, Women, Children, Men, **TPV's...Temporary Protection Visas** or should I say **Torture, Pain and Violation of Rights**. A document issued by our government as a reason for you **To Permit Violence** against me. I mean...what happens after the 3 years of so called protection are over...where will your conscience be when you feed them back to the wolves?

Women are not allowed to speak. They are allowed to drown instead. Their voice, experiences, testimonies, memories, hopes, dreams...all drown. They drown in blood and tears. They drown in desperation!

Head down and eyes closed are the very first orders the terroriser and torturer issues to their victims. The refugees had their heads down and eyes closed as they fell helplessly to their death. Wet and shivering from the cold. But I can assure you they were screaming!

Please do not mistake me for I am not talking about the Titanic.

I am talking about 356 nameless people...bar the 3 Iraqi sisters, Zahra, Fatima and Aiman, who stared at me front the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald.

Women and children...they live like rabbits, living in darkness below the ground, living in inhumane conditions with very little food and no water.

The most remarkable people in this world don't appear on movie screens or in sports arenas or on TV. They drown on boats escaping the life sentence of war and destitution.

We are expendable. It was difficult for me to accept. We come from a country that values life and the individual. I have come to learn that to find yourself in a situation where your life seems of little value is the ultimate in loneliness.

After September 11 2001...it felt like the world had turned the right way around. It was already upside down but people I think just learnt to ignore that they were seeing things backward. The world I think turns around when homelands are occupied and the people of the world do not flinch. What do I say to women who cry in desperation for answers as to why they cannot go into the streets without having to worry if they will be spat on, ridiculed, abused whilst walking their children to school.

We are victims of terrorism and we had not chosen our trench in this war. When I went to the Khiam prison, a prison established by the Israeli army in South Lebanon in 1985, I could smell the stench of death. I could hear there voices screaming. I could feel struggle and survival. The walls were a living dialogue where 'worlds, self and voice are lost'. Lost through the intense pain of torture. They were sharing part of their private and secret worlds with me. Worlds that they had created. Worlds that I cannot fathom living in. But sadly, worlds that I have tasted.

The pain shrinks my body inside itself. As a result of the terror that has imposed on our space, we find ourself constantly trying to create order from the chaos tat has invaded our space. Trying to redefine our reality. Trying to redefine our identity.

In creating and recreating my space, I found myself vomiting myself out...in desperation for a new self. You have dragged me by my feet on your dusty ground and each humiliation has led the onlooker to feel more indignant than fearful.

We see the corpses of the western world but the cries and fears of our women and children are ignored.

I don't know what is worse. Being a young woman myself, to see or hear about the death of masses of people in my homelands or to hear of the hundreds of women and children raped, tortured,

terrorised, spat on, vilified by those that have killed their men and left their homes in ruins? Or can nothing be worse than ignorance?

We do not just make coffee or falafel! We are a forgiving people. We are still understanding and hospitable. If you knock on my door I will still let you in with a smile, sit you down and serve you coffee.

We long for a chance to talk to our aggressors. We long for that face-to-face interaction in which naked humanity could communicate. But as perpetrators you have mute but ever present faces.

We are dealing with the Hederian claim that 'there is a human yearning or need to belong. A need that is in danger of being miserably frustrated'. But belong to what?

I can hear my own heart beating from despair when I lay in bed at night. You have taken the fragrance out of the flowers that I smell in the morning.

The human heart cries out for help, but you do not heed our cries for you neither hear us nor understand us. Must we live in such dark unawareness?

I am grateful to my mother for her struggles have opened the windows of my eyes and the doors of my spirit.

(POSTER of Palestinian women with her two children - a rifle pointed at her by a kneeling Israeli soldier)

I beg you to open the windows of your eyes and see the fear in these little girls eyes. I ask you to feel this woman's spirit of survival and resistance for they too are yearning. To taste the soil of the land that belongs to them. To eat the fruits of the trees that their ancestors grew. To drink the water of hope that drifted into the ocean of hell. How would you feel if fear and terror ravished your night's silence?

This is not a representation of 'mistrust'. This is the definition of reality for the women and children of Palestine. Of Iraq, of Afghanistan. Of Australia. This is the real definition of Terrorism!

Every new piece of bad news is felt by each of us as a personal injury to be borne silently.

I have seen death and destruction. I have seen life being devalued by men dressed in that ugly green who believes the land that they helped invade is their own. I have seen cities destroyed, buildings collapse, and identities fragmented.

I have cried in a failing hope that my very existence would have made a little difference.

Yet I am always unsuccessful in finding the answer as to why such things happen.

No matter how much a person tries, there is no way to reason such illogical, irrational and unjustifiable behaviour.

It has gone beyond intolerable and cruel.

All we are asking is to be left alone. So please leave us alone!

'Action in the absence of understanding is barbarism!'

Also in the words of Khalil Gibran:

"...you may throw me into a dark prison, but you shall not enslave my thinking because it is free."

In closing, I would like to share with you a poem I wrote a few years ago.

Man's Disappearance

When will man appear?
 Come out of the man-made shell?
 Be untangled by the knots of society?
 Be free to fly through the souls fresh air?

When will man appear?
 When will his hands release the grip that strangles his neck?
 Stop hiding behind the skirt of power?
 Release himself from the prison of life?

Will man ever appear?
 Is man's disappearance inevitably apparent?
 Will man's death be led by man himself?
 Will man ever see light or
 Will he remain secluded in darkness?

Will man be killed by the pain of silence?
 When will man appear?
 I ask you?